



Georgia Office

Success Story

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Four Entrepreneurs Use SBA Guaranteed Loan To Open Simulated Stone Plant in rural South Georgia *--Sunset Stone Has 40 Employees at It Plant in Ashburn, Georgia--*

Ashburn, Ga.-- Sunset Stone Inc., is one of those rare small businesses that is able to start and prosper with a number of partners. In this case, there are four partners who have varying backgrounds but a clear vision on how they want to grow their company.

"We started at ground zero," says partner Ronnie Whitehead who has a background in manufacturing. "But we had a great idea and the potential for a strong company." The company partners saw the potential for a new company when they noticed a growing demand for simulated stone in the area.

Along with Whitehead, the other partners are Charles McClain, who has over 15 years experience in simulated stone sales, along with Pam Dollar and Pat Story who add accounting and customer service experience.

The four partners were able to obtain a \$725,000 loan under the SBA's 7(a) Program through First National Bank of Coffee County in Douglas, Georgia. The SBA guarantees to the lender up to 75 percent of a 7(a) loan over \$150,000 to encourage financing for business start ups. Loan proceeds can be used for most business purposes including working capital, machinery-equipment, land and buildings.

In establishing the business in February of 2003, the Sunset Stone partners were able to lease two commercial buildings to house their production operations and inventory. Currently, the company has 46 employees with about 40 workers involved in the production process.

In addition to SBA backed financing, Sunset Stone received assistance from the Georgia Small Business Development Center (SBDC) network, an SBA resource partner.

The company partners met several times with David Dunn of the Albany SBDC Office to discuss how to make their project work and to incorporate their ideas into a workable business plan. Dunn worked with them to develop a plan that included a sound business strategy, projected income, anticipated costs including employee outlays, and other components.

"We provided David the pertinent information and within two weeks he had helped us with completion of our business plan," said Whitehead. "He guided us along and was a super consultant."

“The unique aspect of this business is that four people came together, pooled their assorted talents into a cohesive unit and worked toward common goals,” recalled Dunn. “It is really satisfying to work with people like this and see them meet and exceed their expectations.”

Sunset Stone offers its product in eight colors and four different “profiles” of stone including ledge, rubble, stack and splitface. The simulated stone is fire resistant and can be installed on exterior and interior locations.

The stone is made of cement, light weight aggregates, sand and iron oxide pigments. The mix is poured into molds and the molds are placed in a heated kiln which speed the curing process. The finished stone is stripped away from the mold after the day-long curing process, then packaged for shipment.

The company, located off I-75 about 40 miles east of Albany, sells its products to distributors throughout the Southeast. It currently is the only major manufacturer of simulated stone in South Georgia.

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